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PP RUEHROV
DE RUEHJM #1765 2751454
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 021454Z OCT 09
FM AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6205
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L JERUSALEM 001765

SIPDIS

NEA FOR IPA, NSC FOR KUMAR, JOINT STAFF FOR SELVA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/02/2019
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SUBJECT: IDF SHUTS DOWN WORK AT WEST BANK QUARRIES IN AREA C

REF: JERUSALEM 649

Classified By: CG Daniel Rubinstein, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (SBU) Summary: The IDF raided seven Palestinian mining operations in Area C near Bethlehem during the early morning hours of October 1, seizing equipment and stopping work. ConGen contacts note that this is the first time the IDF has acted against these operations in over a year, and expressed surprise at the action, as the work had been conducted in plain view of IDF positions and on the basis of what they thought was an "implied understanding" between the parties. West Bank stone and marble exporters also face continuing difficulties exporting their goods out of the West Bank. End Summary.

IDF Raid Shuts Down Beit Fajjar Quarries

12. (C) In the early morning of October 1, the IDF raided seven stone and marble companies operating quarries in Area C in Beit Fajjar, a site on the outskirts of Bethlehem. Beit Fajjar is a significant quarrying site, encompassing both Areas B and C, that is worked by several large Palestinian companies and employing more than 500 people. According to the Bethlehem Union of Stone and Marble, the IDF confiscated equipment operating in the quarries, destroyed one earth mover, closed the area, and gave an oral stop work order. The IDF last raided the Beit Fajjar quarries in July 2008. However, the companies returned to work the site in clear view of the IDF months ago, believing that they had tacit approval from the Israeli side to do so, according to Samir Dahdal from Nassar Stone, the largest stone company in the West Bank. After the July 2008 raid, the stone companies were able to retrieve their equipment from the IDF only after paying a heavy fine and agreeing not to work at the site again.

13. (SBU) Palestinian stone companies originally worked quarries in Area B in the Beit Fajjar area. However, as the stone ran out, they gradually began to move into the adjoining Area C land. Companies have applied for permits from the GOI to quarry within Area C, but none of these permits have been granted to date. (Nassar Stone alone has over 20 permits pending on sites within Area C to which it has clear title.) The Union of Stone and Marble estimates that 90 percent of the land suitable for quarrying is located in Area C, while Dahdal has told us that new quarries for the most sought after type of stone available in the West Bank are exclusively located in Area C.

Yesh Din: Hearing on Area C Quarries Delayed

14. (SBU) According to Israeli NGO Yesh Din, ten Israeli companies continue to extract stone from quarries in Area C

(reftel). Yesh Din's March 2009 petition asking the GOI to stop quarrying by Israeli companies in Area C is pending, with a (thrice delayed) hearing now scheduled for November 16.

Continued Difficulties at Commercial Crossings

15. (C) The stone companies around Bethlehem continue to seek GOI permission to export their goods without going through the costly and time-consuming "back-to-back" transfer process at the West Bank-Israel crossing terminals. Union of Stone and Marble representatives report they have GOI permission to move 75 trucks a day from Bethlehem directly through the "Tunnels" checkpoint, but claim that Israeli officials routinely limit access to a smaller number of trucks. Stone bound for export must still go through the Tarqumiya crossing near Hebron, at significant additional cost to the companies.

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